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Changing Authority in the Chinese Communist Party

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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Abstract

This paper examines how authority in China has changed from personal, rooted in a leader's connections, to institutional, rooted in a leader's position or job. This paper examines two cases, that of Jiang Zemin and the Yang brothers and that of Wen Jiabao and the Wenchuan earthquake, to show how authority is shifted. The examination of these cases reveals that while personal authority routinely was more important than institutional authority leaders with personal authority have died out and not been replaced. Because of China's recent history, there was no opportunity for new leaders to build up the personal authority of their predecessors. Therefore, when older leaders with personal authority died, institutional authority became more important.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This paper will explain how authority in China has become less personal and more institutional because of changes in the background of leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (the Party). Leaders of the Party no longer have the military and revolutionary backgrounds of their predecessors, and don't have careers that span multiple policy areas. Therefore, authority in the Party has become less personal and more institutional.

A theoretical framework already exists for examining the changing nature of authority in China. In 1995 in a book looking back at decision making under Deng Xiaoping, Suisheng Zhao theorized that decision-making was becoming more institutional.¹ Under Mao and Deng decision making authority had been highly personal, allowing leaders to exercise their authority well outside of their jobs, and well after their retirements. However, newer leaders, Zhao believed, only had the power that came with their jobs, i.e. they had institutional authority. Zhao theorized that this change would continue as power in China shifter from the personal to the institutional.

This paper will contribute to the examination of personal and institutional authority by showing how institutional authority only became important after those with personal authority left the scene. This paper will examine two cases where both personal

¹ Suisheng Zhao, "The Structure of Authority and Decision-Making: A Theoretical Framework," in *Decision-Making in Deng's China: Perspectives from Insiders*, ed. Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao (Armonk: East Gate Books, 1995)

and institutional authority were important. This will demonstrate how when leaders with personal authority were still around they held great sway. However, as leaders with personal authority left the scene institutional authority became more important.

By the time of Mao Zedong's death he bestrode China like a colossus. His word sent millions to their deaths and created the "permanent revolution" that tore down China apart. Mao dictated policy in every aspect of government and no one questioned him. How could they? Mao was held up as the shining savior of his people. Mao was seen as a warrior poet who defeated the Japanese and Guomindang before building a new communist state.

Mao's authority was absolute and vested in his person. That was why Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, couldn't hold onto power. Despite a quick attempt to build a cult of personality around Hua², and all the titles given to him, Hua never had anywhere near the authority of his predecessor. Hua was not a revolutionary hero or famous leader.

Deng Xiaoping, on the other hand, had been involved in all the foundational struggles of the Chinese Communist Party. Even after being purged from power by Mao, Deng was still important enough to force his way back into national politics and displace Hua.

Deng held a great deal more influence than his official position suggested. He replaced Zhao Ziyang after the Tiananmen massacre even though, technically, Zhao outranked him. When Deng launched his famous Southern Tour, he had no position in the government whatsoever.

² Vinay Srivastava, "Mao, Hua and Charisma-Building," *China Report* 24, no. 2 (May 01, 1988): 143.

After Deng, politics in China began to shift. Jiang Zemin lacked the impressive credentials or charisma of his predecessors, but despite early predictions that he would be a soon forgotten transitory figure³ Jiang held onto power for more than a decade. Hu Jintao, Jiang's successor, also lacked charisma or any military experience, but he too was able to run the state.

Mao and Deng were able to dictate policy, no matter their position, because both had a great deal of personal authority. Personal authority was authority based on personal relationships, connections and charisma. Hu and Jiang, on the other hand, had to rely on institutional authority. Institutional authority was authority deriving from the job or position a person held. Suisheng Zhao explained the difference between personal and institutional authority in China saying:

Personal authority revolves around the personage of leaders and derives from the charismatic nature of strong leaders, which supersedes impersonal organization in eliciting the personal loyalty of followers.⁴ Such authority is rooted in the Chinese tradition of rule of man, not law. Its very basis in Chinese politics is the cultural pattern of personal patronage bonds and the Chinese concept of friendship as instrumentalist personal connections (*guanxi*).⁵ In contrast, institutional authority derives from and is constrained by impersonal organizational rules. In an ideal type, such authority rests not on individual charisma but on formal position in an institutional setting. Insofar as a leader can issue commands under institutional authority, it is the function of the office he holds rather than of any personal quality.⁶⁷

³ Andrew Scobell, "Military Coups in the people's Republic of China: Failure, Fabrication, Or Fancy?" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995): 38-39.

⁴ [This footnote is from Suisheng Zhao] Lucian Pye described this type of authority in terms of "the mystique of leadership"; see Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1988), 135-97.

⁵ [This footnote is from Suisheng Zhao] Lucian Pye discussed the personal bond and *guanxi* in his book *The Spirit of Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁶ [This footnote is from Suisheng Zhao] Institutional authority is compatible with Max Weber's legal-rational authority. See Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 238.

⁷ Suisheng Zhao, "The Structure of Authority and Decision-Making," 234-235.

Traditionally the study of politics in China was the study of those very few in top positions that made decisions for the whole country. China scholars like Lucian Pye argued that the nature of Chinese culture was that the leader would have unlimited power like the emperors did.⁸ Others like Roderick MacFarquhar and Lowell Dittmer stressed the role of the personal authority in decision making for the Chinese Communist Party.⁹

On the other side, scholars like David Lampton have long looked at China through an institutional lens.¹⁰ A trend that in recent years has grown more prevalent. For example, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Michal Meidan, Philip Andrews-Speed, and Ma Xin essentially take strong institutions for granted in their studies of Chinese decision-making.¹¹

Some work has also been done looking at how personal relationships and government relationships compete in decision making, a similar topic, but the results are over 20 years old and inconclusive.¹² Zhao's theory that authority in China was becoming more personal remains untested. There has been work, though, that looks at the personnel changes in the CCP more generally.

⁸ Lucian Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1988)

⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981); Lowell Dittmer, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution revisited: The role of the Nemesis," *Journal of Contemporary China* 5, n. 13 (1996)

¹⁰ Notable works by David Lampton on institutions in China include, *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Mind*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)

¹¹ Michal Meidan, Philip Andrews-Speed, and Ma Xin, "Shaping China's Energy Policy: actors and processes," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, n. 61 (2009); Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Foreign, and Security, policy Decision-making Processes under Hu Jintao," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, n. 3 (2009)

¹² Melanie Manion, "Policy Implementation in the People's Republic of China: Authoritative Decisions versus Individual Interests," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50.2 (May 1991)

Manoranjan Mohanty and Frederick C. Teiwes have written about how the power of each generation of Chinese leaders has diminished and changed as leaders connected to the revolution pass from the scene.¹³ Gang Lin, Yongjing Zhang, and Ezra Vogel have all linked term limits and forced retirement to changes in Chinese political life.¹⁴

There has been a great deal of speculation about the changing nature of authority in China but nothing that specifically traces how and why it has changed. Zhao theorized about the change and his theory is widely accepted¹⁵, but it hasn't been examined closely in the intervening years.

This paper will begin by examining how Mao built his personal authority until he achieved dictatorial levels of power. This paper will then look at how Deng's personal authority overcame Hua's institutional authority, but how Deng later worked to make institutional authority more important for future leaders.

Next, this paper will examine the case of Jiang Zemin's conflict with the Yang brother's over control of the military. This case will show how because of Jiang's background he lacked the personal authority of his predecessors, and required Deng's help in dealing with the Yangs.

¹³ Manoranjan Mohanty, "Power of History: Mao Zedong Thought and Deng's China," *China Report* 35 (February 1995); Frederick C. Teiwes, "Politics At the 'Core': The Political Circumstances of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin," *China Information* 15 (March 2001)

¹⁴ Gang Lin, "Leadership Transition, Intra-Party Democracy, and Institution Building in China," *Asian Survey* 44 (March/April 2004); Yongjing Zhang, "The successor's dilemma in China's single party political system," *European Journal of Political Economy* 27 (December 2011); Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2011)

¹⁵ For examples of the changing nature of Chinese political authority being implicitly accepted see: Yunhan Chu, "Power Transition and the Making of Beijing's Policy towards Taiwan," *The China Quarterly* 176 (December 2003); Li Cheng and Lynn White, "The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin," *Asian Survey* 38 (Mar 1998)

This paper will then contrast the case of Jiang and the Yang brothers with the case of Wen Jiabao and the Wenchuan earthquake. This will demonstrate how institutional authority has become much more important as Wen Jiabao was unable to command the military even in an emergency. Like Jiang, Wen's background didn't lend him a great deal of personal authority. However, by Wen's time in office there weren't other leaders with more personal authority, like Deng or the Yang brothers, so institutional authority ruled the day. This paper will conclude by suggesting some of the challenges to institutional authority that are becoming apparent in Xi Jinping's time as President.

Chapter 2: The Mao and Deng Eras

The Mao Era

In ancient China, all power was theoretically vested in the person of the emperor. The emperor's word was law and nothing was supposed to be beyond his power. Styled the "Son of Heaven," (天子) the emperor claimed dominion over the whole world. His role was held to be so great that an emperor who failed in his duties was said to cause not only problems in government but natural calamities such as famines and floods.¹⁶ In reality, the emperor rarely held such authority. Emperors were bound by tradition and court ritual so that it was often their chief minister who actually executed the management of the state.¹⁷

The ancient Chinese system could be seen as the exemplar of institutional authority. The emperor was vested with total authority by the nature of his position. He was not supposed to have to rely on relationships to maintain power, but his position came with complete authority. It was only when empires broke down that emperors, or would be emperors, had to rely on tactics and relationships to see them through.

Mao is often referred to, by both his admirers and critics, and something of a later day emperor. By the end of his life, he held untrammelled power throughout China. He launched the Cultural Revolution and sent people to their deaths while running the

¹⁶ L. M. Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s-1990s* (Stanford University Press, 2007): 2.

¹⁷ P. C. Hsieh, *The Government of China, 1644-1911* (Routledge/Curzon, 1967): 70-80.

government from behind the scenes. However, the bulk of Mao's authority wasn't institutional. If Mao's authority were institutional, his vast authority would have been inherited by his successors. Seen as the father and savior of China,¹⁸ Mao commanded huge personal authority.

Mao had to build his personal authority over time. When the Guomindang purged and attacked its communist members, beginning a civil war that included the Long March, Mao was only one of a number of communist leadership. Mao was not the most senior,¹⁹ though he was one of several competing for top positions.

There were bitter disputes in the communist ranks over who should lead, including purges and counter-purges.²⁰ Mao had a great deal of success in going into the countryside and recruiting peasants for the growing communist ranks.²¹ He was also a charismatic leader and had the support of a number of other capable leaders like the young Deng Xiaoping.

Mao's authority in this period could best be understood as both institutional and personal. He was a leader of the Communist Party and a general of its military. Therefore, Mao command of soldiers or his structuring party ideology was well within his institutional role. On the other hand, the fight for leadership of the Party didn't come down to who held what job. It was relationships, maneuvering, and the ability to

¹⁸ Stefan R. Landsberger, "Mao as the Kitchen God: Religious Aspects of the Mao Cult during the Cultural Revolution." *China Information* 11, no. 2-3 (July 01, 1996): 196-200.

¹⁹ Zhang Wentian was General Secretary of the Central Committee until 1943.

²⁰ Peter J. Seybolt, "Terror and Conformity: Counterespionage Campaigns, Rectification, and Mass Movements, 1942-1943." *Modern China* 12, no. 1 (1986): 41-50.

²¹ Edgar H. Schein, *Brainwashing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960): 2-4.

command the loyalty of a great deal of the Party's rank and file that ultimately let Mao win out.²² This was an example of his personal authority, the authority tied to the person and not the job.

This mix of personal and institutional authority was not unusual. In fact, both were usually found in some sort of mix. For example, a CEO would have the institutional authority to fire an employee, but he also probably relied on connections and relationships, both forms of personal authority, to become CEO. Mao, ever the master manipulator, used his institutional authority to bolster his personal authority and vice versa.

After the Long March, the communists moved to set up a new base in Yan'an. During that time, despite the fact that their numbers at one point were as low as a few thousand, Mao moved to purify the Party ideologically. The Yan'an Rectification, as it later became known, involved intense sessions of brain washing, purges of those Mao viewed as potentially disloyal, and saw Mao's rise to paramount leadership.²³

Mao had the institutional authority to launch an ideological campaign, but the campaign really strengthened Mao's personal authority as leaders who opposed him were purged and "thought reform" (思想改造) taught new recruits to obey and fear Mao.²⁴

Even leaders who were nominally above Mao in the Party hierarchy, such as Zhang

²² Kenneth Lieberthal, and JP Burns. *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (WW Norton New York, 1995): 45-60.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (UNC Press Books, 1989): 3-7.

Wentain, were subject to criticism. The result of this all was by the time the communists struck out from Yan'an Mao was clearly the leader of the Party.

In the early days of the People Republic, however, Mao's power was largely within his institutional role. Mao was the paramount leader, but there were a number of leaders of the Party. Mao had to consult with other top leaders and come to consensus on key decisions. Mao's behavior in the early days of the PRC was similar to how later Chinese leaders ruled. Mao was first, but a first among equals. When the decision was made to go to war in Korea, it did not come until Mao had achieved consensus in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the highest decision making body in the Party.²⁵ This was not easily won, but Mao never resorted to going outside the government, outside his institutional authority, to get it done.

Over time, Mao became less and less interested in working within the Party. He began to see the Party as a key obstacle to the communist revolution.²⁶ At the height of the famine caused by Mao's disastrous policies during the Great Leap Forward, Mao showed his growing intolerance toward any dissent. At the Lushan conference, Peng Dehuai, one of China's most celebrated generals, wrote Mao a letter noting the horrors being caused by the Great Leap Forward.

Mao demanded that the other leaders come down hard on Peng Dehuai who was purged from the Party.²⁷ Here Mao used his personal connections and his control of many

²⁵ Andrew Scobell, "Soldiers, Statesmen, Strategic Culture and China's 1950 Intervention in Korea." *Journal of Contemporary China* 8, no. 22 (Nov 1999, 1999): 487-497.

²⁶ Hong Yung Lee, "Mao's Strategy for Revolutionary Change: A Case Study of the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly* 77, (1979): 51-55.

²⁷ Frederick C. Teiwes, "Peng Dehuai and Mao Zedong." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* No. 16, (Jul., 1986): 89-93.

members of the Party's leadership to remove Peng Dehuai. This was an example of personal authority since Mao used his connections and it largely violated the rules of the Party.

While Mao relied on his personal authority within the Party to purge Peng Dehuai, Mao soon turned his personal authority against the Party as a whole. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution started with the criticism of a play in Beijing but grew into national movement that set children against parents, students against teachers, and the Party against itself. During the Cultural Revolution Mao's status grew to godlike proportions. Millions of young red guards crossed the country carrying a copy of Mao's Little Red Book.

Terrified at what had been unleashed some veteran leaders of the Party tried to rein it in.²⁸ But, besides Mao, no one was untouchable. Liu Shaoqi who had been recognized as Mao's successor was made a chief target of the Cultural Revolution, purged from the Party, and tortured to death. Peng Dehuai who had questioned Mao earlier, met with a similar fate.

There was no authority inside the Party to launch such an attack on the Party itself. However, Mao's personal authority, his ability to mobilize millions of young people and his radical supporters within the Party, left Mao free to do what he wanted. Authority had swung hugely towards the personal. There were still governing structures, but Mao, who took little direct part in governing during this period, could destroy people, or rehabilitate them, with an off-hand comment (See reference 1).

²⁸ Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* (Harvard University Press, 2014): 64.

The Mao era began with the Chinese government dominated by institutional power. Debate and consensus in the Standing Committee was organized along Leninist party lines. During Mao's life authority shifted more and more from the institutions of government to the person of Mao. By the height of the Cultural Revolution Mao's word was law. With Mao's death, the battle between personal and institutional power would begin again.

The Deng Era

After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping used his personal authority to overcome resistance from institutional leaders on several occasions. Despite this, Deng never had anything like the authority of Mao, and Deng worked to increase the institutional authority of later leaders. By the time Deng died, the transition from personal to institutional authority was well under way but not yet complete. It would take a new generation of leaders without the revolutionary background of their predecessors to complete the institutionalization of authority.

Shortly after Mao died, Hua Guofeng defeated and purged the "Gang of Four" in a brief power struggle to become the permanent leader of China. Hua was vested with enormous institutional authority. He was given more titles than even Mao ever had.²⁹ State propaganda immediately painted him as Mao's successor. However, Hua's time in sun lasted less than three years. Deng Xiaoping, who when Mao died was out of power, purged for a second time, quickly pushed Hua out of the leadership and became the paramount leader.

²⁹ Robert Weatherley, *Mao's Forgotten Successor: The Political Career of Hua Guofeng*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 135-150.

Hua was unable to hold onto power because his institutional authority was simply no match for Deng's personal authority. Hua held all the key titles, but he was a political outsider plucked from relative obscurity by Mao. Deng, on the other hand, was the most accomplished leader to survive the Cultural Revolution. He was a Long March veteran who had served in numerous top posts and was widely regarded as a capable administrator. With radicals like the Gang of Four purged the remaining leaders were mostly long time Party veterans. These veterans all knew Deng but not Hua.

As Teiwes explained:

Analyses of post-Mao China which focus on an alleged succession struggle between Hua and Deng miss the point of this new equation. Whatever tensions existed between the two men, there could never be an equal struggle between them: in any showdown Deng would win, and both understood this from the outset. Despite Hua's formal position as chairman, many developments rapidly indicated that Deng was the *de facto* leader.³⁰

Like Mao, Deng was able to use his personal authority to become the paramount leader. Deng's personal authority was enough to push Hua into semi-retirement, but Deng's authority never compared with Mao's. While Mao had been unchallenged, at least later in life, Deng had to work with other veteran leaders who also had important titles, institutional authority, and deep connections, personal authority. Leaders like Chen Yun had similar backgrounds to Deng's and nearly as much power. With consensus building at the top Deng's position was never directly challenged, but he was no Mao, and no emperor.

Deng was actually quite satisfied with relying on personal authority. He never took the very top institutional jobs. Even after pushing Hua out of the way he let the top

³⁰ Frederick C. Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China*. (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1984): 121.

positions vacated by Hua go to others. Hu Yaobang, whose death years later would start the Tiananmen protests, became the General Secretary. Zhao Ziyang, who would be purged for refusing to use the military against protestors, became premier. Others, who supported Deng in his battle with Hua, filled out the Standing Committee.

While Deng was recognized as the “paramount leader” he was only one member of the Standing Committee and not the highest-ranking one. After 1987 Deng left the Standing Committee altogether. The job Deng did hold onto was Chairman of the Central Military Commission, a body equal in rank to the State Council that oversaw the whole military. This showed Deng’s priorities. He was immediately willing to let others be nominally in charge of the government, but he insisted on retaining institutional authority over the military until his complete retirement after Tiananmen.

The Tiananmen Square protests and massacre presented another example of the continuing clash between personal and institutional authority, and the primacy still held by personal authority. At the time of the protests, Zhao Ziyang was General Secretary, nominally the highest-ranking official in China. Zhao, though, was under no illusions about his role in the Party. When the protests were beginning, Brezhnev visited China. During his meetings with Zhao, Zhao, in his secret autobiography³¹, explained that he told Gorbachev that whatever position Deng held, it was really Deng who was in charge of the government.³²

³¹ Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang*, trans. and ed. Bao Pu, Renee Chiang, and Adi Ignatius (New York: Simon & Schuster 2009).

³² Ibid, 45-48.

The protests created a deep division in the Standing Committee. Zhao wanted to compromise with the protestors, while other wanted a crackdown. The five-man Standing Committee was reportedly tied 2-2 with one abstention. Zhao was the nominal leader but he couldn't break the tie. Instead, it fell to Deng Xiaoping, who held no position that would give him veto over the Standing Committee, to decide.³³ When Deng decided that a crackdown was called for, that was the end of the debate. Zhao's refusal to carry out the orders meant that soon after he was purged from the Party and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.³⁴

Zhao had all the institutional authority as General Secretary but when push came to shove Deng, who lacked any institutional authority in this matter as he had retired from the Standing Committee two years before, was able to make the decision. Deng's personal authority was beyond the institutional authority of the whole Standing Committee. The price for failing to bend to Deng's authority was life imprisonment.

In the Deng era personal authority continued to matter more than institutional authority. Deng himself, though, worked to bolster the role of institutional authority. The main way he did this was by imposing a set of term limits and retirement ages. In the Soviet Union, aging leaders held onto power until they died.³⁵ Some scholars believed

³³ Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link eds., *The Tiananmen Papers*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2001): 191-193.

³⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 619.

³⁵ John Löwenhardt, James R. Ozinga, and Erik van Ree, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Politburo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 129.

that a gerontocracy was the natural outcome of a Leninist model of government.³⁶ This could have been even worse in China with its high cultural respect for the elderly.

Mao had maintained power until he died, but Deng did not. Even before Tiananmen Deng had been phasing himself out of government. He wasn't on the Standing Committee. Almost immediately after Tiananmen, Deng decided to go even further. Deng had been trying to get other older leaders to retire for some time. Deng created a panel that was supposed to be filled with retired leaders to convince them that they would still exert some influence even after leaving office (see reference 2). However, few leaders went in for it.³⁷

After Tiananmen, Deng took the surprising step of retiring almost immediately after placing the relatively junior Jiang Zemin in charge. Not only was Deng not on the Standing Committee he retired from the Central Military Commission as well. This did, eventually, force other aging leaders out. It was hard for other leaders to insist that they were so invaluable that they had to stay in government when Deng himself had left.

Deng also worked behind the scenes to fend off challenges to the newly empowered institutions. In the next section, this paper will examine how Deng bolstered Jiang against the Yang brothers.

With aging leaders retiring, institutional authority started to become more important. Hua had failed since he lacked the deep connections, personal authority, of Deng. Jiang Zemin also lacked those connections but he didn't have a challenger like Deng, in fact he had Deng supporting him. Only the older leaders had the sort of

³⁶ Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre*, 139.

³⁷ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 557.

background, like Deng, that enabled them to assert huge personal authority. Jiang may have lacked personal authority, but so did other leaders from his generation.

This process was slow in happening. It wasn't until Jiang too left the scene that institutional authority became the only game in town. Deng himself would return one last time to use his personal authority to push the Party. Deng felt that his economic reforms were in jeopardy after his retirement. Jiang Zemin, working with economic conservatives like Chen Yun, had slowed the pace of reforms significantly. Deng lacked the institutional authority to push the Standing Committee. In fact, in retirement Deng personal authority was no longer enough to push the Standing Committee, not when Chen Yun, who also had great personal authority, was opposing him.

Instead, Deng took his message of economic opening to the provinces and to the masses. In his famous "Southern Tour" Deng pushed the provincial leaders to move the economy faster.³⁸ It was a move Mao would have been proud of. Deng used popular support against the bureaucracy of the Party. But Deng didn't launch a Cultural Revolution. He simply moved things back towards economic reform. Faced with an outpouring of support for Deng from provincial leaders and the people, the Party leadership had no choice but to follow Deng's path.

The Mao and Deng era saw the dominance of personal authority over institutional authority. But with aging and retiring leaders, by late in Deng's life things began to shift. Before Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao could establish a dominant form of institutional authority, however, Jiang would face at least one serious challenge.

³⁸ Suisheng Zhao, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour: Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China," *Asian Survey* 33 no. 8 (1993): 741.

Chapter 3: Jiang Zemin and the Yang Brothers

Jiang's Rise to Power

That Jiang Zemin ever became General Secretary was surprising. That he managed to hold onto and consolidate power was shocking. Jiang, in many ways like Hua Guofang, was plucked from the relative obscurity of a regional office to suddenly become the leader of the country. However, unlike Hua Jiang managed to hold onto power. Jiang's success, though, was not due to his own personal power or magnetism, but how he was supported by other leaders whose personal authority worked to bolster his institutional authority. Jiang lacked the sort of personal authority that leaders like Deng and Mao had had before him, because Jiang's background was so different from theirs.

The Communist Party had been a revolutionary party. Paramount leaders like Mao and Deng, and secondary leaders like Chen Yun and Yang Shangkun, were all veterans of the Party's founding struggles. Many top leaders were Long March veterans and most of them had been military commanders at one point or another. Leaders also often worked in many different departments. Deng had been a soldier, a mayor, the Minister of Finance, head of the CPC Central Organization Department (the Party's HR department), and the highest-ranking Vice-Premier. Jiang, by contrast, was never a soldier, and only notable for being mayor of Shanghai.³⁹

³⁹ Debra R. Mohanty, "Power Struggle in China: The post - Deng Scenario and Jiang Zemin as the "first among Equals"." *Strategic Analysis* 22, no. 2 (1998): 259.

Jiang's elevation was made possible by the chaos created by Tiananmen. The Tiananmen protests, and later massacre, created problems within Chinese society and for China's relationships with the West, but most worryingly to the Party it had created problems in the leadership. Zhao Ziyang's unwillingness to go along with the military crackdown, even at the cost of his career and freedom, had split the Party's leadership. Deng and other leaders who ordered the crackdown were hopelessly tainted by it.⁴⁰

The leaders who opposed the crackdown were punished for their intransigence. Thus, all the top leaders became unacceptable at a time when leadership was necessary. This meant that Deng had to look outside the inner circle of the Party for a new leader.

Why exactly the choice landed on Jiang was unclear. There was some speculation that it was because Deng admired his strong handling of protests in Shanghai.⁴¹ Others believed it was because Jiang had good relations with powerful leader Li Xiannian.⁴² Still others suggested that Jiang was a compromise pick.⁴³ Whatever the true reason, Jiang came in without the power base of earlier leaders.

Jiang had to rely on other leaders with more connections, i.e. personal authority, to get things done. In practice, this often meant Chen Yun and not Deng. Deng's closest advisors on the Standing Committee had been Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang, who were both now gone. This forced economic policy, which had often been dictated up to this point by push and pull between Deng and Chen Yun, more squarely to Chen Yun's

⁴⁰ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 622.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Damodar Panda, "Struggle for Succession in China." *China Report* 31, no. 4 (1995): 527.

⁴³ You Ji, "Jiang Zemin's Formal and Informal Sources of Power and Chinese Elite Politics After 4 June 1989." *China Information* 6, no. 2 (1991): 6-10.

side.⁴⁴ This would eventually lead Deng to take his case more directly to the people with his “Southern Tour.”

Jiang wasn’t simply a passive receptacle for the will of other leaders. Over time, he promoted people loyal to him into key positions. Coming from relative obscurity this was a slow process that only culminated by the time Jiang left office. By that time, even though Jiang was out of power a huge number of people on the Standing Committee were people from Shanghai where they had worked with Jiang (see reference 3).

What also helped Jiang increase his authority was that the previous generation of leaders was dying out. Deng died in 1997 and Chen Yun in 1995. In addition, leaders retired after serving at most two terms on the Standing Committee so that they couldn’t sit in top spots building their personal authority the way leaders in Deng’s group had (see reference 4). Nevertheless, Jiang’s rise was not unopposed. Other leaders questioned why a relative unknown from Shanghai should be placed ahead of them.

Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing’s Rise to Power

Yang Shangkun was one of the earliest communists in China. According to a profile of him in Xinhua, he was influenced to join by one of his older brothers who was a founding member of the Communist Party in Sichuan.⁴⁵ Yang studied in Moscow before returning to China, and along with his wife (see reference 5), was one of the survivors of the Long March. He was a political officer in the military during the Sino-Japanese war and the Chinese Civil War. After, he was a high-ranking official in the

⁴⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 667-670.

⁴⁵ Xinhua, “The Glorious, Militant Life of Yang Shangkun,” Xinhua, Retrieved March 20th 2015: <http://www.people.com.cn/english/9809/21/a101.html>

Communist Party until he, along with almost all the most senior officials, was purged during the Cultural Revolution.

In other words, unlike Jiang Zemin, Yang Shangkun's career could not have been more glorious. Yang Shangkun was one of the few Long March survivors and had been a senior Party official since almost when the Party was formed. If Jiang Zemin was a man from the periphery of the Party Yang Shangkun was a man from its highest echelons.

Yang Shangkun's career, while not quite as senior as Deng's, mirrored Deng's career in many ways. They were both Long March veterans. They had both been confidants of Mao. They both held senior Party positions until they were purged during the Cultural Revolution. They were even accused of the same crime, placing a bug on Mao, during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁶

When Deng was restored to power and ousted Hua, Yang Shangkun was one of the many veteran Party leaders Deng brought back to power. Yang Shangkun was seen as an economic liberalizer like Deng. Specifically Yang Shangkun was put in charge of the military and given the rank of general.⁴⁷ In 1988, Yang Shangkun even became the President of China, though that position held little real power at the time. Yang Shangkun's real power was over the military. He was one of Deng's top men in the military and one of the most senior men on the Central Military Commission.

Like Deng, Yang Shangkun became forever associated with the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Yang Shangkun appeared on TV to denounce the protests in Tiananmen and was personally put in charge of planning the final military attack on the

⁴⁶ L. Zhi-Sui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (Random House Publishing Group, 2011): 292-293.

⁴⁷ You Ji, "Jiang Zemin's Formal and Informal Sources of Power," 15.

protestors. This show of loyalty enhanced his status with Deng.⁴⁸ Jiang Yanyong, a high-ranking military doctor, later wrote a letter suggesting that at the end of his life Yang Shangkun had come to regret the Tiananmen crackdown. Jiang Yanyong wrote that, “Yang indicated that the June 4 incident was one in which the Communist Party committed the most serious mistakes in its history. He said he could not do anything to correct the mistake, but that the mistakes would be corrected in the future.”⁴⁹

Whatever Yang Shangkun’s scruples after Tiananmen, Deng had retired while Yang Shangkun was still President of China and a senior member of the Central Military Commission. Jiang Zemin was theoretically Yang Shangkun’s boss as both Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. However, in reality Yang Shangkun was a respected veteran leader with deep roots in the Party while Jiang Zemin was essentially an upstart dropped into the top position.

Tiananmen also gave Yang Shangkun a chance to solidify his position. A number of military commanders had refused, or been slow, to accept Deng’s decision to crack down on the protestors. After things settled down, Yang was the one in charge of going through the military and purging those who hadn’t toed the line.

This all made Jiang Zemin’s position in the military extremely weak. He wasn’t a veteran. He hadn’t appointed any generals yet. He had no deep power base to fall back on. Yang Shangkun had all these things. Yang Shangkun also wasn’t alone. Yang

⁴⁸ M. V. Rappai, “Military and the Party,” *China Report* 34, no. 1 (1998): 129.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Mirsky, “Tiananmen : A letter from a doctor who cannot forget,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2004.

Shangkun's half brother Yang Baibing was also a member of the Central Military Commission.

Yang Baibing's resume was not nearly as impressive as his brother's was but he was also a long time soldier and veteran Party member. His career was largely overshadowed by his more famous brother, and most of Yang Baibing's most important accomplishments are similar to that of his brother. Yang Baibing was also purged during the Cultural Revolution and brought back under Deng. He was also primarily focused on the military. He also had a seat on the Central Military Commission. He also was one of the generals directly responsible for sending soldiers into Tiananmen Square. He also helped purge those less willing to use force after the crackdown was over.⁵⁰

Relationships were always important in Chinese politics, and what better relationship to have then with a brother. Like his older brother, Yang Baibing had a similar career path to Deng and was an influential leader.

After Tiananmen, the Yang brothers were in key positions in the military and had deep connections in the military and the Party. Leaders like Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing resembled Deng in terms of having significant personal authority. Yang Shangkun, along with Deng, was considered one the influential "Eight Immortals" of China. The Yang brothers might have been subordinate to Jiang Zemin in terms of job title but they had decades and decades more time in the elite level of Communist Party politics than Jiang had.

Deng had used his personal authority to sweep Hua Guofeng out of power. Could the Yang brothers do the same thing to Jiang? Jiang had inherited all the key positions at

⁵⁰ Rappai, "Military and the Party," 129.

Deng's insistence, but he was surrounded by those whose deep connections in the Party vastly outstripped his. It is no wonder some watchers expected Jiang Zemin to be a transitional figure, like Hua Guofeng.⁵¹

Sidelining Jiang

In 1989, Jiang had the institutional authority. He was the Chairman of the Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Military Commission. However, Jiang was surrounded by people with huge personal authority. On the Standing Committee was Li Peng who was considered Chen Yun's favorite and successor. In the Central Military Commission were the Yang brothers. These people all had powerful institutional authority in addition to their personal authority. There were also retired leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun who still wielded huge influence.

It was never entirely clear how the decision to put Jiang in the highest job was reached. Sometimes it was described as Deng's choice, other times as consensus pick. The argument for Jiang being a consensus pick seemed stronger because so few of the veteran leaders tried to seriously push him aside. If Chen Yun had been very unhappy about Jiang, it seems hard to believe Deng could have permanently restrained Chen Yun. While the Yang brothers were also long time Deng supporters they were not as willing to go along with Jiang. Part of this came from Jiang's most serious weakness.

Jiang was a relative outsider when he was picked but his career was not bereft of accomplishments. Running Shanghai successfully was a significant post. As the leader of Shanghai, he had at least some nominal introduction to national politics. He was also

⁵¹ You Ji, "Jiang Zemin's Formal and Informal Sources of Power."

considered more cosmopolitan than many of the Chinese leaders of his time and was famous for quoting long speeches in foreign languages.⁵²

However, Jiang had absolutely no military background. In the Soviet Union, another country with a Leninist party system, the military had been consciously kept out of top-level politics. Lenin had put Trotsky, who had no military experience, in charge of the military, and Stalin had sidelined the most successful general from World War II. In China, though, Mao, Deng Chen Yun, Yang Shangkun, Yang Baibing, and many more of the top leaders had all had extensive military experience.

Mao had also killed a number of other potential leaders who had even more successful military careers. The Communist Party had been forged in a series of wars and all its leaders had at least some military experience. Even those like Zhao Ziyang who hadn't really had much control over the military during his time at the top had some military experience.

Jiang, on the other hand, had no military experience. He had been too young at the time of the Chinese Civil War, and Korea, and there weren't any significant wars after that. He also hadn't come up through the military. His background was entirely civilian.

What this meant in practice was an increasing separation of the top civilian and military leadership. Mao and Deng had been military leaders. In fact, both men had relied on the military at key points to enforce their will (see reference 6). Hua Guofeng hadn't been a military leader, but he had also been pushed out of power. Now the top leader, Jiang Zemin, was not a military leader and the top military figures, the Yang brothers, were not part of the civilian leadership.

⁵² B. Gilley, *Tiger on the Brink: Jiang Zemin and China's New Elite* (University of California Press, 1998): 87.

This sort of separation of the military from politics was common in democratic countries, and specifically considered an important feature, but it had little precedence in communist politics. Mao famously said, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”⁵³ Mao also believed that if push came to shove the Party’s control over the military was crucial.

The Chinese military was not an independent part of the government but a “People’s Military.” Ideology and loyalty to the Communist Party was as important as actual fighting ability.⁵⁴ Mao and Deng, after all, weren’t so much generals as commissars for the military. So how could Jiang keep control without this background? Jiang relied to a huge degree on Deng.

Deng’s Role

Deng may have been the greatest political survivor in Chinese history. He survived Chiang Kai-shek's purge of communists. He survived the Long March. He survived the intense political infighting in Yan’an. He survived the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and being repeatedly purged from office. He even survived the turmoil after Tiananmen, but not unscathed. Deng had retired. He had started to retire years before when he gave up his seat on the Standing Committee, but he still held onto key positions like the head of the Central Military Commission. However, after Tiananmen Deng really retired. Famously, his most senior position was the head of the Chinese Bridge Players Association.

⁵³ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Mao Tse Tung* [Zedong], (1966): “5. War and Peace” retrieved March 15 2015, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch05.htm>

⁵⁴ Paltiel, Jeremy, "PLA Allegiance on Parade: Civil-Military Relations in Transition." *The China Quarterly* 143 (1995): 787.

Deng wasn't the only one who had retired. Deng's exit had forced a number of other senior leaders to retire as well. Chen Yun, probably the second most powerful man in China and often Deng's rival on economic issues, retired. Li Xiannian, an early supporter of Jiang and possibly the third most powerful man in China, gave up his spot as President of China to Yang Shangkun. In fact, except for spots on the Central Advisory Committee, a body Deng had created to give retired leaders some role, Yang Shangkun was the only one of the "Eight Immortals" still in an official job.

Deng was on the outside but he still held great power. That was the nature of his personal authority. Deng had already proven when he pushed Hua Guofeng aside that he didn't need big titles to get people to go along with him. Again during Tiananmen Deng's personal authority had proven stronger than Zhao Ziyang's institutional authority. Deng would demonstrate again the enduring power of his connections during his "Southern Tour."

The Chairman of the Chinese Bridge Players Association was able to move economic policy in China. Deng's personal connections ran so deep and his popularity was so great that when he pushed for economic opening the Standing Committee couldn't resist. Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, and the rest of the Eight Immortals couldn't wield this sort of power. Chen Yun, always more cautious than Deng, probably opposed the purpose of the Southern Tour, but it was Deng who won.

The table was set for a conflict between Jiang Zemin and the Yang Brothers. Jiang had all the institutional authority. He was the Chairman of both the standing committee and the Central Military Commission. However, he lacked personal authority. He was a relative newcomer to the central party. He didn't have a revolutionary

background. The Yang brothers had some institutional authority. They were both important members of the Central Military Commission. Yang Shangkun was also the new President of China. However, they also had great personal authority. Yang Shangkun was one of the Eight Immortals. The Yang brothers were veterans of the Long March and years of central Party politics. How could Jiang possibly overcome this disparity?

Forcing the Yangs Into Retirement

According to what Frederick Teiwes called “well-connected oral sources”⁵⁵ the conflict between the Yangs and Jiang came down to what role Jiang should have in running the military. Jiang wanted the same command as his predecessors while Yang Baibing felt that since Jiang had no military experience Jiang should leave the running of the military to the generals.⁵⁶

Why this conflict was allowed to fester was another matter. Maybe Deng never thought that the Yangs would push so hard against Jiang’s leadership. Alternatively, maybe the Yangs simply thought that Jiang was so fatally weak that there would be little resistance to them pushing him aside on military matters. This confrontation came not long after Deng’s Southern Tour.

The entire Southern Tour was a repudiation of Jiang’s economic policies. In retrospect, it was clear that Deng didn’t mean to push Jiang out. After all, Deng continued to support Jiang for years afterward. Deng just wanted Jiang to take a different direction on economic issues.

⁵⁵ Frederick Teiwes, *The Politics of Succession: Previous Patterns and a New Process and a New Process in China's Post-Jiang Leadership Succession: Problems and Perspectives* Wong, John and Zhen Yong Nian eds. (Hackensack: World Scientific Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2002): 46.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

However, from the Yangs' perspective here was a new leader without deep connections whose great patron was not only retired but was now publicly repudiating Jiang's policies. To the Yangs, Jiang must have looked very weak.

Jiang as the Chairman of both the Central Military Commission and the Standing Committee of the Politburo should have had enough institutional authority to remove the Yangs on his own, but that never happened. It spoke volumes about the weakness of Jiang's institutional authority that he could not remove a disloyal subordinate. It was not that Jiang wanted the Yangs to stay, he later got Deng to push them out, it was only that Jiang could not do so himself.

Over the rest of his term, Jiang would go on to promote many generals and work to reorganize the military. This means that his inability to deal with the Yangs was not some structural failing in the Chinese government that prevented him from taking action. Jiang's institutional authority was just no match for the Yangs' personal authority and Jiang knew it.

Ellis Joffe, one of the great scholars of the Chinese military described the Yangs' control over the military writing:

The General Political Department, and the entire political control system under it, were strengthened by the 1987 appointment as its director of Yang Baibing, the younger half-brother of Yang Shangkun, veteran Party leader and its point man in the PLA's Tiananmen intervention. After Tiananmen, Yang Shangkun was appointed first vice-chairman of the Military Affairs Commission while Yang Baibing became its Secretary-General. This gave the Yangs a strong grip over the PLA, especially over the sensitive area of personnel affairs, and enabled them to move their supporters into key positions. In the end, this was also the reason for their downfall in 1992, when Deng and his colleagues decided that the Yangs had become overly powerful and ambitious.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ellis Joffe, "Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect." *The China Quarterly* 146 (1996): 306.

The idea that the Yang brothers could pose a danger to Jiang's rein was apparent to Chinese scholars well before they were actually purged. You Ji wrote in 1991:

His lack of seniority and of personal ties with other Politburo members clearly disadvantages Jiang in his partnership with Li Peng. Given its diversified composition, it will be hard for Jiang to achieve firm control over the Politburo in a short period of time. Without such control, it is unlikely that Jiang can establish "the core authority in the third-generation leadership" which Deng is said to expect him to establish. Leaving aside policy differences, most of the Politburo members are either his seniors or his equals, and his formal title of General Secretary and the position of CMC Chairman do not automatically provide him with the power to control the top leadership. For Jiang, the only way to achieve this is to reshuffle the current leadership (which he is now undertaking at the lower levels), and nurture his own network of followers. However, this takes time, and it is time that Jiang lacks most.

[...]

When Deng leaves, Yang Shangkun and the other generals in the Yang clan will be a potential threat to the subtle balance of power in the military, but the degree of cooperation between Deng's generals and Jiang should not be underestimated. For example, Liu Huaqing, a close confidant of Deng, is in charge of nominating key commanders in his capacity as Permanent Vice-Chairman of the CMC. Even though a potential Jiang-Liu alliance does not mean an automatic transfer of Deng's power-base to Jiang, it will increase Jiang's chances of solidifying his CMC command, probably when Yang retires at the 14th Congress.⁴⁹ When this happens, the influence of his brother Yang Baibing, who has no independent power-base of his own, may dwindle. Moreover, Jiang recently succeeded in raising the military budget by a large amount, which may boost his popularity with the army.⁵⁸

Jiang's weakness was apparent despite the opaque nature of the Party and his own interests in hiding it. What was less clear at the time was how Jiang could overcome the Yang brothers.

It was also telling that Jiang never seems to have tried to push them out himself. Jiang was under no illusions that his institutional position was enough to deal with threats to his rule like this. This showed that the Yangs were right to try to push Jiang aside. Both the Yangs and Jiang came to the same conclusion, that Jiang could not enforce his will on the Yangs.

What the Yangs didn't count on was the continuing influence of Deng. If this whole incident showed how personal authority still far outstripped institutional authority

⁵⁸ You Ji, "Jiang Zemin's Formal and Informal Sources of Power," 16.

then it was also important that Deng still had far greater personal authority than the Yangs. Hua Guofeng may have failed in a test of personal vs. institutional authority but Hua didn't have someone like Deng backing him.

While the Yangs' position might have seemed extremely strong compared to Jiang's, it was, in fact, hopelessly weak. If institutional authority were the deciding factor then Jiang would have the power to remove them. If personal authority were the deciding factor then Deng would have the power to remove them.

Clearly, Jiang lacked the ability to remove them, but when Jiang appealed to Deng that was the end of it. Just as Jiang had little ability to resist the Yangs, the Yangs had little ability to resist Deng.

In the Mao era, Chinese politics had been a winner-take-all fight to the death. Anyone Mao thought was opposing him wound up in jail or dead. Deng changed the nature of power struggles in China by making them less deadly. When Hua lost out to Deng, Deng reportedly offered to let Hua keep some of his positions. Even when Hua refused, he maintained at least some status for the rest of his life.

Zhao Ziyang was purged from the Party after Tiananmen, but he wasn't killed or even put on trial. Zhao Ziyang was kept under house arrest, but it wasn't uncomfortable (see reference 7). Therefore, when Deng did decided to move against the Yang brothers he didn't have them expelled from the Party or arrested.

By 1992, Yang Shangkun was 85 years old. Deng, with the help of other powerful retired leaders, was able to force Yang Shangkun to retire.⁵⁹ This didn't end Yang Shangkun's influence totally. Years later, he took review trips to important military bases

⁵⁹ Rappai, "Military and the Party," 129.

and was treated with the highest honors.⁶⁰ Yang Shangkun was still one of the Eight Immortals, only now he, like the rest of the Eight Immortals, was retired.

Yang Shangkun died in 1998, a year after Deng Xiaoping. In his obituary in the New York Times, David Shambaugh wrote that, “Jiang Zemin is rejoicing over this death, I would surmise. This removes a big obstacle to his control over the P.L.A.”⁶¹ This shows how Yang Shangkun was still an important figure after his retirement. However, with him and his brother out of power he was no longer a threat to Jiang’s day-to-day control over the military.

Jiang replaced Yang Shangkun as the President of China. Before then office of President was often separated from the top political or Party office. This was another attempt to increase the role of institutional authority. After Yang Shangkun’s death Jiang was the President of China, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. Jiang was the head of the government of China, the Chinese Communist Party and the military.

Yang Shangkun was not Jiang’s only problem. Yang Baibing was still a highly placed leader in more direct command of the military than his brother was. Reportedly, Yang Baibing even went as far as to hold a secret meeting where he and other military officers talked about replacing Jiang.⁶²

This was clearly too much for Deng to stomach. Yang Baibing had been, like his brother, a big supporter of Deng. Yang Baibing had enthusiastically given the military’s

⁶⁰ June Teufel Dreyer, "The New Officer Corps: Implications for the Future." *The China Quarterly* 146 (1996): 331.

⁶¹ Erik Eckholm, “Yang Shangkun, 91, Ex-China Chief, Dies,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1998.

⁶² James Mulvenon, "Chinese Military Leadership After the 17th Congress: Hu's Guys Or Whose Guys?" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 23 (2008): 6.

support to Deng's Southern Tour not long before this.⁶³ However, that wasn't enough to save him when he challenged the power structure. Like his brother, Yang Baibing wasn't expelled from the Party or arrested when Deng wanted him gone. Instead, Deng used an old business trick. Deng promoted Yang Baibing out of the way. Yang Baibing lost his place on the Central Military Commission, but he was added to the Politburo.

From the outside, this could look very much like a promotion. However, the Politburo was a much larger body than the Central Military Commission, and the real decisions were made in the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Also, and more importantly, Yang Baibing was no longer in direct control of any part of the military.

To make sure the Yang brother's hold on the military was over after they were pushed aside a purge of their supporters in the military was undertaken.⁶⁴ Again, people weren't thrown in jail but it meant the end of the careers of those who had been too close to the Yangs.

With this, the threat the Yang brothers posed to Jiang ended. Their hold on the military was broken and a lesson was served to anyone who might think of challenging the political order. Jiang was not necessarily strengthened directly by all of this. The danger the Yangs posed to him was a symptom of the weakness of his hold over the military. The only one to come out of this incident looking strong was Deng Xiaoping.

However, the defeat of the Yangs gave Jiang what he really needed, which was time. Challenges like those from the Yang brothers became less and less likely as those with such personal authority passed away. There wasn't another generation with huge

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ S. Zheng, *Party Vs. State in Post-1949 China: The Institutional Dilemma* (Cambridge University Press, 1997): 237.

personal authority waiting to take their place. The wars and revolutions, which had forged Deng's generation of leaders, had no equivalent for Jiang's generation. There was no new Deng waiting to come onto the scene, from there on out it would only be people like Jiang.

The Aftermath

Mao had been concerned with the Party "controlling the gun,"⁶⁵ i.e. controlling the military. This wasn't a problem for Mao or Deng who had military experience, but for Jiang, who had no military experience, it proved to be a challenge. Yang Shangkun was a Long March veteran, as were Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong. Jiang Zemin's biggest claim to fame was handling protests in Shanghai well. In retrospect, it wasn't surprising Jiang had trouble consolidating power.

Deng worked to make institutional authority more important while he was still actively leading the government. He enforced retirement ages, a trick never pulled off in places like the Soviet Union. However, even with Deng's work Jiang showed just how little institutional authority meant at this point. Repeatedly it was those with personal authority who could come in and override those with institutional authority.

Deng used his personal authority to push out Hua Guofeng who held all the top jobs. Deng made the final decision about what to do in Tiananmen and then purged Zhao Ziyang, the nominal leader of the Party, for not following Deng's orders. Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing were conspiring to sideline Jiang and there was little Jiang could do about it. Only Deng, again, had the authority, in retirement, to push the Yangs aside.

⁶⁵ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Mao Tse Tung* [Zedong]: "5. War and Peace"

So what hope could institutional authority ever have against personal authority in China if every example showed that personal authority would win out? The answer lied in how people got personal authority. Deng was a Long March veteran. He was one of Mao's top advisors right from the founding of the PRC. He held jobs in the government, the Party, and the military throughout his long and illustrious career. He was purged from the government, but Mao always found him so valuable that he was brought back.

Similarly, people like Chen Yun, Yang Shangkun, and Li Xiannian all had important backgrounds. They were war heroes, and veteran administrators who had worked in many parts of the government and Party. They were all also old and dying. Deng, Chen Yun, Yang Shangkun, and Li Xiannian all died during Jiang's term in office.

There weren't people like them ready to replace them. On the military side, China had not fought a serious war since Korea. Decades of peace, only interspaced with some minor border conflicts, left little room for military heroes. There was no second Long March. A career in the military offered little opportunity for glory.

A generation of possible leaders had also been destroyed in the endless upheavals of Mao's China. Tens of millions died during the Great Leap Forward. Millions were beaten and died during the Cultural Revolution and those who did the beating ended up sent down to the countryside. This was not a recipe for producing people with long careers in government.

Other more liberal leaders had ended up on the wrong side of Deng. Hu Yaobang was a broadly popular figure who lost his job and whose death sparked Tiananmen. Zhao Ziyang refused to go along with the crackdown and was removed. The most defining

events of Deng's time didn't leave leaders with more popular support but with less. That was why Deng reached out of the center to find Jiang Zemin.

The result of all this upheaval was that the only leaders left were people like Jiang. They might have had successful careers, but they looked nothing like Deng Xiaoping or any of the Eight Immortals. Personal authority had rested on these sort of incredible careers. With no one left with such a career, the role of personal authority began to fade.

Chapter 4: Wen Jiabao and the Wenchuan Earthquake

From Jiang to Hu

By 2002 when Hu Jintao took over as the new President and head of the Politburo Standing Committee, six of the Eight Immortals were dead (see reference 8). There were almost no living Long March veterans anywhere. Those leaders with great personal authority from the Chinese revolutionary wars had all passed from the scene. Hu was inheriting a leadership that had no experience of revolution or war. Jiang had been the exception when he was elevated to leadership, but by 2002 he was the rule. Whatever challenges people like the Yangs had posed to Jiang, Jiang had overcome.

Deng still cast a long shadow over the process, however. Hu Jintao was not Jiang's choice for a successor. Deng had arranged it so that Hu Jintao would be the next leader after Jiang. Reportedly, Deng was impressed by how Hu Jintao had suppressed a revolt in Tibet when he was the governor there. Jiang was reportedly not very happy about having his successor chosen for him, but he never tried to challenge Deng's order of things, even after Deng's death.⁶⁶

While those revolutionary leaders with great personal authority had left the scene there was still some role for personal authority. Jiang now had his own personal authority. After more than a decade in power, he had appointed a large number of generals and

⁶⁶ Joseph Fewsmith, "The Sixteenth National Party Congress: The Succession that Didn't Happen." *The China Quarterly* 173, (2003): 15.

promoted many people throughout the Party. Jiang exercised this personal authority by not being willing to totally give up power. Jiang followed Deng's design and didn't try for a third five-year term as leader however, he held onto the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. Jiang rationalized that Deng himself had held onto that position for a while after he gave up his role on the Standing Committee.

Reportedly, this was an unwelcome surprise to Hu Jintao. However, Hu Jintao didn't really have the ability to challenge Jiang on this. Hu Jintao was in the same position that Jiang was in a decade before. He had a lot of institutional authority as the new leader but he had very little in the way of personal authority. Hu Jintao didn't come from a revolutionary family or have a background in some war or revolution. Hu Jintao was trained as an engineer and promoted slowly throughout the Party first provincially and finally nationally. Hu Jintao, though, spent almost his entire career working relatively minor jobs in the provinces. His most major success came as a sort of regional governor. He had a very successful career, but one that offered little opportunity to build anything resembling personal authority.

However, things had fundamentally changed in China. Jiang may have been able to exert some personal authority but China was entering the era of institutional authority. Jiang was able to extend his time in office a little but that was all he could accomplish. This chapter will examine how personal authority failed and how that had become typical of the new China. Personal authority may have been extremely important early in Jiang's term in office but by the Hu era institutional authority was the only game in town.

The Rise of Wen Jiabao

Wen Jiabao, like Hu Jintao, was a Party technocrat who was put on the road to higher offices during Deng's time. While Hu Jintao was an engineer, Wen Jiabao was a geologist by training. Like Hu, Wen Jiabao had no military experience or revolutionary credentials. He was known as a friendly guy and very effective administrator. Unlike Hu, who was groomed for leadership with posts as the leader of provinces, Wen Jiabao mostly worked in Beijing.

Wen was close with both Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, having been promoted by Hu Yaobang, and spending his early Party career working closely with Zhao Ziyang. Just days before Zhao Ziyang's fall from power and imprisonment, Zhao Ziyang came to the protestors in Tiananmen and pleaded with them to leave before they were hurt. A famous picture of this event includes Wen Jiabao who is standing behind his boss.

While Zhao Ziyang and many liberals were purged after Tiananmen, Wen escaped unscathed and continued to have a brilliant career. It was not known why exactly Wen was not a target of the purges after Zhao Ziyang fell. While Hu Jintao became President, leader of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Wen Jiabao became Premier of the PRC and a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo.

Wen's reputation was always one as a man of the people. He has sometimes been referred to in the Party press as "Grandpa Wen,"⁶⁷ "the Crying Premier" or "the People's Premier" (see reference 9). During my own time in China, it wasn't unusual for students

⁶⁷ Bin Xu, "Grandpa Wen: Scene and Political Performance." *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 2 (2012): 122.

to express their personal admiration for Wen Jiabao, or say that they thought he understood them better than other leaders.

Wen's reputation later suffered when US diplomatic cables revealed by Wikileaks noted that Wen had serious issues with how his wife and son traded on the family name and was considering a divorce.⁶⁸ His reputation took another hit when the New York Times published an expose on his family's huge wealth.⁶⁹ However, at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, these problems had yet to be revealed.

As Premier, one of Wen Jiabao's chief duties was to chair the State Council. The State Council was the highest administrative authority in the government of China. China, though, had essentially three government systems. The State Council oversaw the government of the People's Republic of China. The Standing Committee of the Politburo was the highest body in the Communist Party. The Central Military Commission was the highest body in the People's Liberation Army. The Communist Party, and the Standing Committee, outranked the other two groups. Both the State Council and the Central Military Commission reported to the Politburo. This meant that in practice the State Council and the Central Military Commission were on equal footing with one another.

⁶⁸ Michael Sheridan, "Sex, Buddhism and ballroom dancing: WikiLeaks reveals Beijing underbelly," *The Australian*, June 20, 2011.

⁶⁹ David Barboza, "Billions in Hidden Riches for Family of Chinese Leader," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2012.

The 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake

On May 12th 2008, a magnitude 8 earthquake hit Wenchuan County in Sichuan. Located not far from the capital of Sichuan, Chengdu, the earthquake killed nearly 70,000 people, left millions homeless, and caused tens of billions of dollars of damage. It was one of the deadliest and most destructive earthquakes in recorded history. The earthquake had a profound affect on China. I remember even several years later students collecting money for disaster relief for Sichuan.

The popular story of the earthquake was also one of personal triumph for Premier Wen Jiabao. Wen Jiabao was hailed for being one of the first high-ranking government officials on the scene. Looking for a more positive story, the Chinese press was full of praise for Wen. Even the western press reported on his huge surge in popularity. The Associated Press ran a story featuring this section:

The Chinese government doesn't have the most approachable reputation, but Wen's been praised for his quick and sympathetic response to the May 12 earthquake in central China that's killed more than 67,000 people.

"This is Grandpa Wen Jiabao, hang on child, we will rescue you!" he shouted at one point to a student trapped in the rubble, state media reported.

His Facebook page was set up two days after the quake. It's full of supportive comments and photos of him walking through the rubble and comforting victims.

"I love you, oh my God," Tina Wong of Hong Kong posted.

"A model Premier for the world!" Sukant Chandan of London added.

"It's so great 2 see u here!" Celeste Lee of China said.⁷⁰

The official story of the earthquake was one of quick official response to a natural disaster. Later, there would be question raised, especially by outsiders, about why the

⁷⁰ Cara Anna, "Chinese premier shows up on Facebook," *The Associated Press*, May 27, 2008.

death toll was so high and how shoddy the building standards had been. But at the time, the only story in the Chinese press was that of a triumph of good, efficient government.

Liangen Yin and Haiyan Wang explain how the official media turned the tragedy of the earthquake into a story about caring politicians:

Drawing upon critical discourse analysis, this article has explored how the China Daily has modified the disaster discourse of the Wenchuan earthquake into a people-centered myth. In so doing, China Daily represents each politician as a 'servant of the people', and the army (PLA) which played the most significant role in rescue work as 'the people's army'. The politicians, the PLA and the survivors identify the rescue operation as a miracle of working in harmony. The outcomes of the rescue operation and the myth are overwhelming gratitude and happiness. As a result, the tragedy of the earthquake is turned into the tragi-comedy of the people-centered myth. Analysis of the myth indicates that the myth is characterized by emotion prevailing over reason, marginalization and defamation of the survivors, and gender discrimination.⁷¹

This story, though, covered up the actual lack of command and disunion on the ground.

Wen Jiabao and the PLA

Wen arrived on the scene of the earthquake very quickly after it happened:

Premier Wen's swift response to the Sichuan earthquake was widely applauded. The earthquake happened at 2:28 p.m., and Wen's flight left Beijing at 4:40 p.m. At 7:10 p.m., after arriving in Chengdu, Wen went to Dujiangyan; at approximately 8:00 p.m., Wen held an emergency meeting in a tent in Dujiangyan; and at 10:00 p.m., Wen went to a collapsed hospital and then to Juyuan High School, where hundreds of students were buried under the rubble. He arrived in the quake zone even faster than most rescue teams and troops.⁷²

Wen received accolades for his quick response to the crises. There was even some suggestion that Wen received so much praise that it angered Hu Jintao.⁷³

⁷¹ Liangen Yin, and Haiyan Wang, "People-Centred Myth: Representation of the Wenchuan Earthquake in China Daily," *Discourse & Communication* 4 (2010): 396.

⁷² Bin Xu, "Grandpa Wen," 121.

⁷³ James Mulvenon, "Party-Military Coordination of the Yushu Earthquake Response." *China Leadership Monitor* no. 33 (September, 2010): 3.

The military, though, did not receive the same praise initially for its handling of the relief efforts. A report for the US Naval War College described the successes and failures of the effort saying:

The PLA transferred more than a million people in distress to safer areas and provided extensive aids in terms of tents, temporary quarters, food, potable water, medical treatment, and disease control. Nonetheless, the central indicator of “saving lives” was not impressive: only 3,336 people were saved from the ruins of the earthquake by the PLA. In the end, over sixty-nine thousand were confirmed killed, with over eighteen thousand reported missing. A more careful examination of the case shows that weak civil-military interagency coordination was a major reason why the PLA was not able to save more lives.⁷⁴

The problems of “civil-military interagency coordination” the report noted was the relationship between the military and Wen Jiabao. The report continues:

As a result partly of the urgent desire to save the lives of the hundred thousand people trapped in the epicenter of the earthquake, Wenchuan County, and partly of his lack of understanding of the PLA (stemming from the fact that he had never served in the military), Wen somewhat hastily ordered the PLA to reach the epicenter within thirty-four hours of the earthquake. The commanders on the scene, however, saw reaching Wenchuan on such short notice as almost impossible; Wenchuan, although only one hundred kilometers from the city of Dujiangyan, where most of the PLA troops had gathered, is surrounded by impassable mountains, and all the roads were now blocked by massive rock slides and debris. Efforts to clear the landslides were hampered by incessant rain, minor quakes, and a shortage of heavy road construction equipment. Wen also requested the PLA to send helicopters or air-drop troops into Wenchuan. To the PLA commanders, however, because of the rain, quakes, four-thousand-meter-high mountains, and a visibility of less than twenty meters, such an order amounted to a reckless risking of the lives of their soldiers.⁷⁵

What made matters more complicated was that it was unclear under Chinese law who was really in charge. “China’s 2007 Emergency Response Law and Regulations on the Participation of the People’s Liberation Army in Emergency Rescue and Disaster

⁷⁴ Nan Li, *Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era: Implications for Crisis Management and Naval Modernization* (Washington: Department of the Navy [Imprint], 2010): 26-27.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 27-28.

Relief identify both the State Council and the Central Military Commission as command organizations in crises.”⁷⁶

In addition, the State Council, which Wen Jiabao headed, does not have any direct authority over the military. Only the Central Military Commission, headed by Hu Jintao, or the whole of the Politburo Standing Committee, had authority over the military. The situation between the military and Wen became so strained Wen was heard by reporters yelling at military leaders: “In one instance, he yelled over the phone, ‘It’s the people who keep you fed. You know what to do now!’ and in another, ‘I don’t care what you’re gonna do. I only want the 100,000 people saved. This is an order!’”⁷⁷

At a moment of crises the relationship between China’s number two man and the military was not working. This breakdown in leadership did not represent a fundamental rift between the Party and military, however. Instead, this breakdown came about because of Wen’s lack of personal authority and the increasing important of institutional authority to the PLA.

The PLA’s Allegiance

The PLA resistance to Wen represented a fundamental change in the nature of the PLA and of governance in China. At first glance, there seem to be strong similarities between the PLA’s problems with Wen and the Yang brothers attempt to sideline Jiang. In both instances, generals had problems with a new political leader. The difference between the situations lied in differences between Wen and Jiang.

⁷⁶ Richard P. Suttmeier, "China’s Management of Environmental Crises: Risks, Recreancy, and Response." In *China’s Crisis Management*, edited by Chung, J. H. 2013: 22.

⁷⁷ Bin Xu, "Grandpa Wen," 123.

Jiang was not only the Chairman of the Standing Committee he was the head of the Central Military Commission as well. The Yangs were trying to push Jiang out of the way despite him being their direct superior. Wen was the head of the State Council but was not on the Central Military Commission. If during the Wenchuan earthquake the PLA had resisted the orders of Hu Jintao, which might be similar to Jiang's situation with the Yang brothers, but in pushing back against Wen the PLA was doing something fundamentally different.

Press coverage in official sources emphasized repeatedly that the military was following the instruction of Hu Jintao.⁷⁸ Despite his prominence during the rescue efforts much less was said of the PLA and Wen.⁷⁹ The Yang brothers had tried to use their personal authority to push the civilian leadership out of the military. During the Wenchuan earthquake, the military had not tried to shrug off civilian authority it had more objected to Wen, who was not directly in charge of the military giving orders.

You Ji and Daniel Alderman wrote of their survey of articles by the PLA about the earthquake that the military objected to Wen personally, but not to Hu:

I have read hundreds of articles written by PLA Officers about PLA Wenchuan operations. The standard language is "troops are deployed and activities are implemented under the leadership of the CC, the CMC, and Chairman Hu." Virtually no mention was made to Wen Jiabao and the State Council's Wenchuan Rescue Headquarters. Soldiers were unhappy at Wen's unnecessary reprimand to the PLA Air Force for its failure to parachute in Beichuan due to bad weather. Clearly, in their minds it was Hu, rather than anyone else, that they should unconditionally obey.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ James Mulvenon, "Party-Military Coordination of the Yushu Earthquake Response." *China Leadership Monitor* no. 33 (September, 2010): 2-3.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁰ You Ji and Daniel Alderman. "Changing Civil-Military Relations in China." Chap. 4, In *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*, edited by Kamphausen, Roy, David Lai and Andrew Scobell (Strategic Studies Institute, 2010): 185.

According to some sources Hu may even had to replace Wen as the leader of the response effort because of how the PLA felt undercut by his public commands.⁸¹

The PLA also felt ostracized since it had actually responded quite quickly to the disaster:

The Chinese military responded with unprecedented speed to the earthquake. It was reported that within 13 minutes of the earthquake, the PLA's General Staff Department activated the military's plan for handling emergency incidents. Within two hours, two military helicopters flew to the disaster zone to assess the damage caused by the earthquake. Within five hours, the military's national earthquake rescue team, consisting of 227 people mainly from an engineering unit of the Beijing Military Region, boarded a charter plane heading to the earthquake- hit zone.⁸²

This was enough to drive a wedge between Wen and the PLA.

What had really changed, though, from the Yang brothers to Wen was the role of personal authority. Deng Xiaoping would not have had to deal with such blowback from the PLA had he ordered them into disaster relief, no matter what his position was. Nor would someone like Mao have needed to be directly in charge of the military for their orders to be obeyed.

By the time Wen was in office, however, the PLA resented him giving them orders or criticizing them. They didn't look to sideline the top leader, Hu Jintao, the way the Yang brothers had but they resented the number two leader giving them orders if he wasn't directly entitled to do so.

⁸¹ Nan Li, *Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era*, 28.

⁸² Jian Zhang, "The Military and Disaster Relief in China: Trends, Drivers and Implications." In *Agency in Asia Pacific Disaster Relief: Agency and Resilience*, edited by Sakai, Minako, Edwin Jurriëns, Jian Zhang and Alec Thornton (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014): 79.

The Wenchuan Earthquake and Institutional Authority

In comparing Jiang Zemin's fight with the Yangs and Wen's problems with the PLA the most important difference to note was the role of personal authority. Jiang had the institutional authority to command the Yang brothers and the PLA, but he couldn't do it since the Yangs had so much personal authority that they risked overwhelming Jiang. Only by appealing to Deng, who had even more personal authority, could Jiang win.

Wen, at least as far as the PLA saw it, lacked the institutional authority to order the PLA even during an emergency. Moreover, Wen didn't have any connections with the PLA that he could rely on to give him institutional authority. Wen had never served and had no revolutionary background.

Hu also had little in the way of personal authority. When Jiang had wanted to stay on longer in the Central Military Commission, Hu had no ability to oppose him. However, Hu had great institutional authority. So by the time of the Wenchuan earthquake the PLA did not want to take orders from Wen, who in this case lacked personal or institutional authority, but didn't mind taking order from Hu, who also lacked personal authority but had institutional authority.

Institutional authority had become the key factor not because of a shift in values that placed institutional authority above personal authority, but because there weren't many people left with personal authority. Partly by design, and partly by happenstance, the background of leaders of the Party had changed.

Some of this was planned by Deng. Deng had enforced term limits and retirement ages even at the cost of retiring himself. This contrasted with the Soviet Union where the only leaders to give up office before they died were those removed in a coup. Since a

leader in China could only stay in office for so long, they couldn't build up the sort of personal authority someone like Deng or Yang Shangkun had.

Some of the change was a result of China become a more professional place. In Mao's days revolution was prized above everything. Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in part to destroy the professional bureaucracy running the Party. In a revolutionary setting things changed all the time. Deng went from a military commissar to running the Party's internal bureaucracy to dealing with the economy and foreign policy. However, career paths like that didn't exist in Deng's or Jiang's China.

The military had changed from a revolutionary army, as Mao called it a "people's army," to a more modern professional army. You Ji and Daniel Alderman wrote:

First, revolution is no longer an organizational objective for the PLA. It simply describes its willing subordination to the Party with no forced ideological hold on soldiers. Second, the overlapping personnel structure is basically undone. There is no politician in uniform in the country.⁸³ The minimized PLA presentation at the apex of power has become largely functional.⁸⁴

The military had become so separate that a military career was not related to a political career. With no generals on the Standing Committee and no top leaders serving in the military it was not possible to have personal authority over the military as a civilian or personal authority over the civilian leadership as a general.

Much of the change away from personal authority came from China's modern history. Mao, Deng, Yang Shangkun, and others were revolutionaries, but they had won the revolution. From 1949 onwards, there was not a real threat to the Party's control of

⁸³ [This footnote is from Ji and Alderman] In preparing for restoration of military ranks in 1985, some senior Party leaders suggested that since local party secretaries concurrently held the position of the first political commissar of the regional garrison, they should be granted a military rank. Deng personally vetoed this motion.

⁸⁴ Ji and Alderman. "Changing Civil-Military Relations in China," 137, 180.

China. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao could not become revolutionaries since there was no revolution to participate in.

The newer generations of leaders had also known a China almost entirely at peace. The revolutionary leaders had not only fought the Guomindang, but the Japanese in a brutal war. They had then joined the Korean War just a very short time after winning their revolution. However, after this there were almost no more wars. Mao constantly prepared for war with the Soviet Union but none came. Deng fought border skirmishes with Vietnam and India but they were relatively minor.

You couldn't be a war hero in Hu Jintao's China since there were no wars to be a hero in. There were no more Long March veterans since there were no more Long Marches. The main events since the Party took power were internal discord brought on by the Party itself.

There were no heroes from the Great Leap Forward, or to whatever extent there were they were executed. The Red Guards were not counted as heroes after the Cultural Revolution ended. Those who suffered through the Cultural Revolution were more victims than heroes.

There was also a generation destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. Millions of young people were first swept up in the mass hysteria as Red Guards then sent down to the countryside to suffer. Universities were closed for years on end. When the Cultural Revolution finally ended, those people who could come back from the countryside lacked any skills.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Yixin Chen, "Lost in Revolution and Reform: The Socioeconomic Pains of China's Red Guards Generation, 1966–1996." *Journal of Contemporary China* 8, no. 21 (1999): 219-239.

The competition between personal and institutional authority had been won by default. Institutional authority had not become more important there just wasn't much personal authority left anymore. There were no more leaders like Deng Xiaoping, or Yang Shangkun.

Would the PLA Have Obeyed a Modern Deng?

A useful counterfactual to consider is would the PLA have obeyed someone who had a background like Deng Xiaoping if he was in Wen Jiabao's position during the Wenchuan earthquake. Like all counterfactuals, it can never be absolutely known what would have happened in this situation. However, it could be useful to imagine this scenario to address the question of how much importance personal authority could have had during the Hu administration.

Imagine if, instead of Wen Jiabao, the Premier had been someone with a background comparable to Deng's. Deng was, after all, vice-premier on two separate occasions. Instead of having Wen's total lack of connection with the military what if the premier had significant military experience and was considered something of a national hero?

In that situation, I think there are a number of reasons why things would have worked out differently during the Wenchuan earthquake. First, Wen's lack of personal connection within the military meant that he ended up calling them out in public. He may have won brownie points with the public for yelling, "It's the people who keep you fed"⁸⁶ at some PLA officials but it didn't endear him to the PLA.

⁸⁶ Bin Xu, "Grandpa Wen," 123.

A premiere with connections within the military probably would have worked through back channels. He might still have pushed the PLA to work as hard, but he probably wouldn't have publicly insulted them. It's little wonder the PLA was annoyed at taking orders from Wen when this is what was happening.

The PLA, however, had undergone significant reforms since the Deng era. Was it possible that even if someone like Deng had been the premiere they would still have had trouble using their personal authority since the PLA itself had become much more institutionalized? For example, Alderman and Ji wrote:

The essence of China's post-Mao military reform is to regulate the PLA's political role in the country's political and social system, based on a CCP/PLA understanding on the danger of military interventionism in domestic politics. At the same time that Party officials are officially barred from intruding into PLA affairs, they are especially prohibited from forging any unauthorized contacts with PLA generals for the purpose of political lobbying.⁸⁷ To the CCP, the significance of institutionalization is that it can help avoid the worst of Mao's practice of using the gun to settle internal party disputes.⁸⁸

So maybe a premiere with more personal authority still wouldn't have been able to command the PLA without causing problems.

The best evidence against this line of thinking came from what happened when a leader with some personal authority tried to exercise it. At the end of Hu Jintao's term, the details for who would succeed to the Politburo Standing Committee were worked out. To the surprise of a great many observers the main decisions seem not to have been made by Hu, who was still President and endowed with a great deal of institutional authority,

⁸⁷ [This footnote is from Ji and Alderman] For instance, Politburo members are not supposed to inspect local PLA garrisons when they visit localities, and the local military leaders are not requested to accompany them without the specific instruction of the CMC General Office.

⁸⁸ Ji and Alderman. "Changing Civil-Military Relations in China," 147, 181.

but by Jiang Zemin, who despite his very advanced age was able to put his people on the Standing Committee.⁸⁹

If Jiang was able to use his personal authority, accrued over his years at the top but still nothing like Deng's, to influence such important decisions then personal authority still was more important than institutional authority. The main difference then between a figure like Wen and one like Deng was that Deng had a radically different background from Wen.

⁸⁹ Joseph Fewsmith, "The 18th Party Congress: Testing the Limits of Institutionalization." *China Leadership Monitor* 40, (2013) 3-5.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the case of Jiang Zemin and the Yang brothers Jiang was unable to overcome them without the help of Deng Xiaoping. Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing were veteran Party members who had deep connections throughout the PLA and the Party. Jiang, by contrast, was a relative newcomer and surprise pick to lead the Party after Tiananmen. Jiang never tried to face down the Yangs himself. As a newcomer to the central Party, he was in a hopeless situation. However, Deng's personal authority vastly outstripped even Yang Shangkun and so Deng was able to quietly shunt them off to the side.

Wen Jiabao was the premiere of China and the head of the State Council yet when the Wenchuan earthquake hit he was met with resistance and unhappiness from the PLA for his attempts to take command of the situation. Wen had never spent any time in the PLA and lacked the personal authority necessary to overcome the deficiencies in his institutional authority. Hu Jintao, on the other hand, had the institutional authority and the PLA had little problem with him.

In the case of Jiang, personal authority had been hugely important in creating and resolving the situation. Jiang's institutional authority was simply no match. In the case of Wen and the earthquake there was not enough personal authority from any of the people involved to overcome the institutional rules of the game.

China under Mao, Deng, and Jiang, had been a country where personal authority was much more important than institutional authority. But by the time of Hu Jintao personal authority had receded from the scene and institutional authority had become more important. There had been many changes in China during that time, but the most important was that those leaders who had great personal authority had died off and they hadn't been replaced.

Mao, Deng, Yang Shangkun and others were revolutionary heroes with great personal authority. As things in China became less revolutionary, however, there were no longer great opportunities to become a revolutionary hero. Deng had worked hard to make sure that old leaders with a lot of personal authority would, eventually, retire and that it would be hard to build up that sort of authority again.

Deng was successful and by the time he died personal authority was receding from the scene. By the time of Wen Jiabao, even top leaders like Wen lacked personal authority. China had changed not because the nature of the country had changed but because there was no one left in the old guard. Personal authority might still have been more important than institutional authority but there was no one left with much personal authority.

In recent days, some people have begun to wonder if personal authority might be making a comeback. Hu Jintao finished his term in office and, just as Deng had designed, left quietly. He even left more easily than Jiang, as Hu didn't hold onto a spot on the Central Military Commission the way Jiang did.

The new President, Xi Jinping, is seen by some as reviving the old systems of personal rule and personal authority. Indeed Xi Jinping has done things that are quite

surprising. His crack down on corruption has included some very high-ranking leaders.⁹⁰ It is also said that Xi Jinping is ruling in a more personal style than his predecessors relying on Leading Small Groups to bypass the entrenched Party bureaucracy. Xi Jinping also has deeper connection across the Party than his predecessors. His father was a significant figure in the Party and Xi Jinping was often referred to a “princelings” for his deep family connections.

While it is far too early to assess if Xi Jinping really is changing the nature of rule in China back towards personal power there are reasons to doubt it. First, just because Xi is taking a more personal role in leadership than his predecessors does not mean he is undercutting institutional authority. As the President, and leader of both Standing Committee and Central Military Commission, Xi has vast institutional authority. Xi may be more powerful than Hu, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t relying on institutional authority.

Second, early reform and power building is a hallmark of Chinese politics. Both Jiang and Hu promised reform when they came in and had to build a power base. It is possible that what we are seeing now is just early power building by Xi and it will decrease over time. Third, Xi is term limited. Both Jiang and Hu obeyed Deng’s design of term limits. It seems unlikely that Xi would be able to hold onto power for more than 10 years, which means that he has only a limited period to build any personal authority.

Third, there are strong institutional forces that don’t want to see one man running the country again. Both Jiang and Hu are still alive and have deep connections at the top.

⁹⁰ Samson Yuen, "Disciplining the Party. Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Campaign and its Limits." *China Perspectives* no. 2014/3 (2014): 42-44.

Additionally, the generation below Xi will want its turn in leadership so there will be pressure from both above and below for Xi to not overstep.

Finally, Xi simply doesn't have a background similar to any of the Chinese leaders who lead by personal authority. Xi is not a war hero. Xi is not a revolutionary. Personal authority might be more important than institutional authority but Xi doesn't have enough personal authority to change the system. In only 10 years in office, he won't have the time to build that much personal authority either. Only time will tell, but I believe it is unlikely we are seeing a fundamental shift of authority in China.

In conclusion, China had long been a country where personal authority dominated over institutional authority. Deng Xiaoping worked to change that. While in the Jiang era personal authority was still dominating over institutional, by the time of Hu and Wen there was so little personal authority left that institutional authority became what mattered in China.

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1. Mao supposedly rehabilitated Zhao Ziyang with an off-hand comment wondering what had become of him.
2. The Central Advisory Commission (CAC) was established in 1982.
3. Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Wu Guanzheng, Li Changchun, Zhou Yongkang, Zhang Dejiang, Zeng Peiyan are all Standing Committee members who either worked in Shanghai or are usually associated with Jiang.
4. Unless they were being groomed for the top job then they got three terms.
5. One of the few women to survive the Long March.
6. Mao to create and eventually end the Cultural Revolution, Deng to survive the Cultural Revolution and eventually find his way back into the center.
7. For a description of his life in captivity see Zhao Ziyang, Prisoner of the State.
8. Bo Yibo and Song Renqiong were alive but in their 90's.
9. After the Wenchuan earthquake when pictures of him crying appeared on TV.

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